International Students - A Segregated and Vulnerable Workforce

Chris Nyland, Helen Forbes-Mewett, Simon Marginson,

Gaby Ramia, Erlenawati Sawir, Sharon Smith

Abstract

The growth of the international education market has generated a community of student-workers that is vulnerable, growing and under-researched. Drawing on interviews with 200 international students, we show that a very high proportion of these students are employed and that this workforce is segmented and that while all student workforces are segmented, many international students must accept forms of work and levels of payment unacceptable to locals. Little has been done to ensure the rights of these workers are protected and we suggest this situation requires resolution.

Introduction

Australia's participation in the international education market has generated a workforce of student workers that lack the visibility needed if its rights are to be assured. Building on research that has explored how gender segments and stratifies the student workforce, we argue these workers are also segmented by residential status and vulnerable to a greater extent than domestic students. The paper begins by discussing the existing student-worker literature and proceeds to identify themes that emerged from 200 interviews with international students in Australia, that clarify the nature of their work experience and why they tend to be situated at the lower end of the student-worker strata.

Student Workers – segmented and stratified

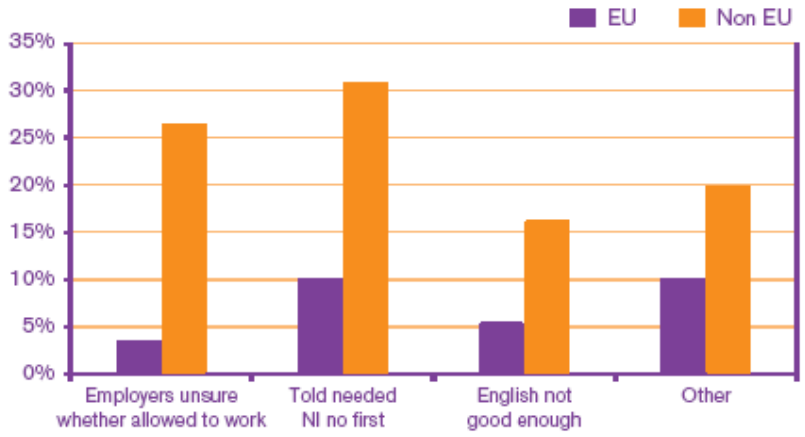
There exists an extensive body of literature on domestic student workers that focuses on quantifying the proportion of students who work, the number of hours they labour, and the effect employment has on academic results and student wellbeing (Bexley et al. 2007). Much of the literature that has discussed the student labour force fails to recognise it is both segmented and stratified. Lukas (1997), by contrast, has shown student workers are segregated by gender and that 'in the main' are employed in unskilled jobs. The qualifier, 'in the main', is important for it constitutes a recognition that not all student-workers lack skills and many take jobs that require a high level of proficiency in the respective field. In short, Lukas' qualification recognises student labour is both segmented and stratified. In this paper we build on this observation by examining the work experience of international students.

There exists a paucity of literature on international student employment. In the United Kingdom (UK), UKCISA, (UK Council for International Student Affairs) a body that seeks to promote the wellbeing of international students, reported in 2004 that just over 50 per cent of international students had undertaken paid work at some time with research post-graduates being more likely than other students to be employed and international students enrolled in newer universities being more likely to work than are those studying at long-established institutions. UKCISA (2004) also reports that even amongst international students there is segmentation between the non-European Union (EU) internationals with 53 per cent engaged in employment compared to 46 per cent of EU-internationals and 47 per cent of domestic students. The 2004 report did not state how many hours international students work but a subsequent UKCISA study found international students work longer hours than domestic students (UKCISA 2006).

The data on hours worked needs to be treated with caution for non-EU international students are permitted to work only 20 hours per week in term time in the UK. It is reasonable to assume therefore that they are wary of acknowledging they work beyond this limit. That a great many do work longer hours is confirmed by one study that managed to circumvent student caution and found 75 per cent of non-EU international students were employed more than 20 hours per week in term time and a little over two-thirds of them were working more than 30 hours (Spencer et al. 2007).

The UKCISA (2004) studies also found 58 per cent of international students who sought paid employment found it hard to obtain work and students from non-EU countries found it much harder to obtain employment than EU international students (64 per cent of non-EU international students compared with 26 per cent of EU international students). Non-EU students are also notable in the extent to which they report employers are disinclined to employ them. The most common reason offered for this perceived disinclination (31 per cent non-EU students compared with 10 per cent EU international students) are problems with National Insurance (a social security register) though five per cent of students reported direct discrimination.

Figure 1 Reasons given why it was difficult to find work for EU and non-EU students



Source: UKCISA 2004

UKCISA's data suggests international students studying in the UK are more likely to be employed and work longer hours than domestic students. Australian research, by contrast, suggests domestic students are more likely to have part-time jobs and work longer hours. Surveying first year students at a representative range of universities in mid term, Krause et al (2005) reported 23.3 per cent of full-fee paying international students were employed and on average claimed they were working 11.62 hours per week compared with domestic student who worked 58.7 per cent and hours 12.45 per week on average. Rosenthal et al, (2006), by contrast, found a 27.2 per cent level of participation by international students and a number of hours per week lower on average than is the norm for domestic students. Finally, a third study, found 31.5 per cent of international students had earned some income from employment in the previous year (AEI 2005).

Regardless of which set of results are utilised, it remains the case that the research literature suggests that international students studying in Australia are less active in the labour market than their UK counterparts. One factor that helps explain this apparent divergent pattern is that UK researchers ask students if they have worked while Australian researchers generally ask students if they are employed. If conducted during term time, the latter approach has the benefit of clarifying whether students are working while studying but does so at the cost of clarity with regards to how many students worked for pay at some time whilst in Australia. It is possible the diversity in the results is also a reflection of the relative rigor with which immigration officials enforce the work provisions tied to student visas but whether or not this is the case is not known. However, what is obvious is that international students have good reason to withhold the extent to which they are active in the labour market. Research

shows that many have a non-wage income (for example, money from their family) less than half the Australian poverty line, suggesting that many of these students need paid employment and must work long hours just to guarantee their food and shelter (Forbes-Mewett et al. 2007). We also note that McInnis & Hartley (2002) concluded after surveying 1563 domestic and international students that while no international student was willing to admit working more than 20 hours per week these researchers remained convinced this was because they feared the possible consequence of this admission. In our study we have been able to circumvent this reticence because we gathered knowledge of their paid work experience by the use of one to two hour interviews rather than by conducting yet another questionnaire survey. We now turn to the evidence thus generated.

The Interviews

The data presented in this paper draws on structured conversations conducted in 2005 with 200 international students (101 females and 99 males). Students were drawn from nine universities representing the geographic, urban-rural, and status diversity that characterises Australia's higher education sector. To explore the nature of the international student work experience we address the key issues of level of participation, employment form, remuneration and discrimination.

Workforce Participation

Approximately one third of interviewees indicated they derived their main source of income from paid employment while 57 per cent revealed they were employed at the time of interview. A further 13 per cent indicated they had worked at some time while studying in Australia, meaning 70 per cent worked at some stage. While not specifically asked, 37 per cent of students offered information about the number of

hours worked. Similar numbers of the employed students indicated they worked between 1-5, 6-10 and 11-15 hours per week (22.7 per cent, 21.3 per cent, and 18.7 per cent respectively), while 33.3 per cent students who had worked indicated they were employed between 16-20 hours per week. The latter finding contrasts with the Rosenthal et al (2006) study that reported 11.6 per cent of students worked more than 16 hours. It is notable and understandable that, of the interviewees who offered information regarding the number of hours worked only four admitted working more than 20 hours per week. Given working beyond this number of hours can result in mandatory deportation, it is reasonable to assume others are not prepared to admit they are breaking the law.

The caution revealed by many students was exemplified by phrases such as "maybe 20 hours" (P68 female, aged 25, China, Commerce) advanced by one student when she was asked. In contrast to the latter's caution the small number of students that admitted working more than 20 hours were quite open possibly because they were nearing the end of their studies or because they accepted our assurances their confidentiality would be respected:

> *I'm working at two jobs. I work five days in a real estate company as office administrator but I work from 9 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. and in the evening … in the Indian restaurant I work only on Thursdays and Fridays. That's from 5.00 to 12 in the night.* (P36 female, aged 25, India, Media and Communication)

Another student working many hours over the limit presents a similar case:

> *I'm working as a tutor in the Faculty … and I'm also working at the lab, at the help desk. These two jobs and a job in a Sydney café - I am working at a part-time job as a café barrista - I basically make coffees. Making some good money there. You work 3 days and you make two to three hundred bucks, everything's free, snacks, coffee, everything's free! I work 3 days there, and 2 days here [at university]*. (S96 male, 24, India, Information Technology)

This example suggests the student is working equivalent to full-time employment, as was another though this individual indicated he had suffered as a consequence:

> *I had to work a lot, I mean in my first two years when I was studying I had to work a lot to support myself so staying like 30 – 40 hours of work, and I was also trying to achieve high marks in my studies* (P 132 male, aged 27, India, Music Therapy)

The above accounts are not representative of the majority of interviewees but may well be more representative of the international student community than the data reveals. Regardless, these accounts are important because they highlight the fact that some students do work excessive hours in order to have financial security. It is worth noting that those working within the 20 hour limit appear to be earning less than needed for financial wellbeing given our knowledge of the income international students tend to receive from home.

The evidence provided in the interviews demonstrates international student-workers frequently need to undertake employment that ranks low in terms of employment stratification. The following comment comes from a student who is also a medical practitioner, *"… I'm really desperate for money I will have to do anyway any other jobs"* (P34 female, aged 39, France, Medicine). The interviewees did not always specify their employment and some named two or three occupations. According to one interviewee, international students *"do all weird kind of jobs to sort out their financial problems"* (P109 male, aged 30, India, Dentistry). Table 1 presents the range of employment undertaken by interviewees.

Table 1: Number of students employed by industry

Industry	No. in industry	% totals
Health/medical	2	1.4
University	44	31.0
Education	9	6.3
Human services	4	2.8
Professional	22	15.5
Labouring	9	6.3
Hospitality	37	26.1
Retail	15	10.6
Total	142	100

The high proportion of international students with jobs in the higher education sector as shown in Table 1 reflects the large number of postgraduates (43 Phd, 78 masters/grad dip) who participated in the study. Allowing for this fact, it remains that these results reveal a many international students (43 per cent) work at the lower status end of employment. Working in these occupations means international students often receive remuneration that leave them little choice but to work hours that open them to the risk of deportation.

Remuneration

In line with the tendency to withhold information about the number of hours worked, students did not always provide details about remuneration. However, 62 students (31 per cent) gave information revealing the hourly rate they were paid and from this we were able to ascertain that many students are paid well below the legal minimum.

Table 2: Hourly rate of pay

$ per hour	No of students	% of total students
$7 -$10	21	33.9
$11 -$15	15	24.2
$16 - $20	18	29.0
$21 - $25	3	4.8
$26 - $30	0	0
$31 - $40	1	1.6
$41 +	4	6.5
Total	62	100

Of the students who reported their hourly rate, 58 per cent earned between $7 and $15 per hour at a time when the legal minimum for a casual waiter was $16.08 an hour and the rate for a shop assistant was $17.97 per hour. Five of these students were under 21 and may have been paid a junior wage. Nevertheless, the data reveals many students are paid well below the legal minimum and hence must be working for unscrupulous employers, receiving cash in hand payment. The following accounts support this assessment:

> *…it's a waitressing job. I am getting $60 per shift … like 5 p.m. – 12 midnight.* (P36 female, aged 25, India, Media and Communication)

It is commonly thought Chinese restaurants frequently employ international students and pay poor wages – a view supported by the following:

> *They usually pay you below standard especially in Chinatown as well, they usually pay you $7 or even $6. I think that is certainly too low.* (P38 female, aged 20, Indonesia, Commerce)

Another commented:

> *I worked for one of my friends to do some paper work I worked in Chinese restaurant … the pay is very low, like nine dollars per hour. I don't want to work in the restaurant anymore."* (P177 female, aged 27, Chinese, Education)

One interviewee summed the majority view by simply observing:

> *Chinese restaurant give you very low pay.* (P79 male, aged 19, Chinese, Commerce and Economics)

Although seemingly more prevalent in Chinese restaurants, the interviews show evidence of unsatisfactory remuneration across the lower levels of work stratification.

> *Restaurant… $8 [hour] … I want to change some administrative job, less hard, maybe more pay, $11, $12.* (P68 female, aged 25, China, Commerce)

While it is regrettable the student quoted above is being underpaid, it is interesting to note her estimate of an appropriate rate for an administrative position is well below

the legal amount indicating that she may be aware that the industry in which she works is both segmented and poorly paid compared with other employment.

Reflecting interviewees' awareness of their vulnerability, few indicated they would become assertive if they experienced problems in the workplace. However, the views of those that did must not be overlooked:

> *I wasn't happy with the rate. I went back to the boss, I said I'm not happy with the salary, I think I deserve more and he was happy to increase it by $1. He said yeah I'll increase it. "* (P63 male, aged 27, Sri Lanka, Technology and Computronic Engineering)

The findings to this point support the views of Takeda (2005), an international student who worked as a waitress for the legal minimum. She described how her hours were reduced once her employer found it possible to employ international students who would work for less. Takeda rejected the notion her difficulties were a consequence of racism and accepted it was simply the operation of the market. Many interviewees shared her view asserting their situation was a 'natural' outcome of being perceived to lack language and cultural attributes available to domestic students though a minority believed their employment difficulties were also a consequence of discrimination.

Discrimination

Most references to discrimination related to an inability to find work in a field with high status with only a small number of students reporting they had experienced discrimination in the workplace. One interviewee, for example, reported he had been subjected to discrimination "plenty of times":

> *Yeah, plenty of times it's happened. I got the experience from my faculty itself because of one lady working in our department and she's very discriminatory.*

> *When you go and talk to her, she really looks at your colour.* (P96 male, aged 24 Indian, Information Technology).

The above perspective, however, was shared by few others interviewees tending to suggest other dimensions to explain unfriendliness.

> *In the working place some people are not so friendly you can't really guarantee that everyone is as friendly as you are so I don't think its discrimination just depending on the different personality.* (P174 female, aged 28, China)

Whilst individual characteristics play a role in perceptions of discrimination, this does not diminish the strong likelihood that discrimination occurred for some of these students, however, greater effort needs to be made to investigate the extent of these unacceptable practices. Fortunately, many students found their workplaces friendly and management and supervisory staff helpful and approachable. Reports such as, *"I can learn English there and the people are nice"* were common (P178 female, aged 30, Japan, Interpreting).

International students, qualified in their field, often accept they have no alternative but to seek lowly stratified occupations:

> *"It's just like the labour kind of work and we Indians we don't get any professional work. I have got another friend in my house, he is 33 years old and he has been working for 12 years I guess in India. He is so capable of doing so many things but all he can do now is clean dishes in a restaurant or manage the till in 7-11. Things like wash cars or waiter."* (P8 male, aged 23, India, MBA)

That they are perceived as being less employable than their domestic peers who have permanent residence was not uncommon:

> *"…there is too much discrimination between the international and national students, or the Australian and non-Australian residents, especially for getting work."* (P37 male, aged 40, Iran, Physiotherapy)

This was an observation a minority claimed was also manifest within the workplace:

> *"… sometimes they see you're a foreigner so they assign you to some hard job. They separate to different groups and maybe some easy job, good job for the local, but if you're a foreigner they give you a hard job."* (P28 male, aged 25, China, Information Technology)

Despite this unfortunate situation, the student wished to maintain the employment because he had a good relationship with other workers and an 'okay' relationship with the boss.

Even when students are successful in gaining employment, they often experience difficulties because they lack both language and workplace skills in unfamiliar work environments. It is to be expected that students well-qualified in what are normally considered high status professions, have difficulty when confronted with a workplace for which they do not have the skills or experience. This phenomenon is likely to exacerbate what appears to be a downward spiral for international students in relation to the student-worker strata. One student summed this up by commenting:

> *"…the problem out here is the international students are not informed of everything. We are coming from different cultures and the work ethics from the countries we come from are very different."* (P190 male, aged 25, Bangladesh, Engineering Telecommunication)

The interviews show that difficulties experienced by international students in the workplace are sometimes overcome but often the student's employment is terminated or the student leaves and needs to begin the task of seeking work, perhaps in an even lower status role.

Unable to gain employment in their field of qualification, students occasionally expressed feelings of shame relating to the type of work they are doing. The following student indicated she not only had to deal with circumstances not in accordance with her expectations, but also had to consider the shame expressed by her family:

> *"Because I see a lot of Indian students coming and they're working in some situations that they would have never imagined to work back in their country… I would have never imagined working as a waitress in India. My parents would have never, never, allowed me in my entire life to work as a waitress…[and] they have told me never to tell to other people of my family that I'm working as a waitress."*(P36 female, aged 25, Indian, Masters in Media and Communication)

The perspective expressed by this student may attract little sympathy in some quarters but it does raise the need for prospective students to be given a realistic picture of the employment circumstances they will encounter when studying in Australia.

Conclusion

The growth of the international education market has begun to generate a discussion around the amount and form of part-time work that is undertaken by international students. In this paper we have shown that the role of the new labour force is similar to its domestic counterpart in many ways. As with the local student labour market it is a field that is unorganised, segmented, stratified and often characterised by cash in hand payments and exploitation. By undertaking interviews with 200 international students we have been able to show that the form of segmentation and stratification international students experience has distinctive characteristics. These stem from the disadvantages international students experience relative to their domestic peers, from employer willingness to profit from their vulnerability, and from the failure of governments to protect their rights as workers. As a consequence of these developments in many cases international students are compelled to accept jobs and conditions of employment that may render these students open to deportation. Through the coming two decades it is estimated that the number of internationals will triple. (Department of Education & Training, 2004) As this process unfolds the

problems and exploitation that our interviewees have highlighted will become ever more acute unless these issues are confronted. Growing numbers of students will find themselves forced to compete for the jobs available in the small part of the labour market where language and cultural attributes have a limited role in the labour process and competition will ensure employers exploit this opportunity if left under-regulated. Governments have displayed a clear intention to ease immigration and labour laws in ways designed to assist their education providers market their educational services to the developing countries. While at the same time, they have shown a marked ambivalence to regulate in ways that can ensure student workers are neither endangered nor exploited. Indeed, in Australia the Commonwealth government has enacted an amendment to the Higher Education Support Act, making it illegal for universities to collect any compulsory fee from a student for non academic services, this legislation was consciously designed to undermine the capacity of student unions to protect the rights of students through the provision of information about rights in the workplace and has taken no steps to ensure the diminished capacities of these bodies are compensated for by the strengthening of other institutions. We believe this is immoral and unacceptable. The possibility that international student workers' conditions will further deteriorate if current practices and policies are continued requires a determined response from governments, universities, unions (both student and workplace) and all other agencies that have a responsibility to ensure international student workers can access decent work and pay conditions as well as having their rights protected in both the labour market and the workplace.

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